



PEACOCK

OUR NATIONAL BIRD

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1. GENERAL

mong the birds in India - there are over 2,000 of them - the most magnificent, the most fascinating and the most brilliantly coloured one is the peacock, our National Bird. This splendid bird with its gorgeous plumage and majestic dance, is a familiar sight all over the country. It brings to mind various cherished images and rhythms in life on account of its close association with our art and literature, folklore, religion, legend, rituals and ceremonials. *Rigveda*, the most ancient Sanskrit text, contains several references to the virtues of the peacock. Legend links it with Lord Krishna who is said to have adorned his head with its plumes. In the culture of other countries also it occupies a prominent position.

This beautiful bird belongs to the family of pheasants (*Phasianidae*) and is broadly related to partridges, quails, spur fowls, snowcocks and pheasants. The female is the peahen. Collectively, both are called peafowl.

There are three well-known species of the peacock. The blue peacock or Indian peafowl is confined to India and Sri Lanka. The green peacock or Burmese peafowl is found in Burma and South Asia. There is also the double-crested Ethiopian. The blue peacock has long been famous. It was so much prized in the past that Indian kings sent it as gift to King Solomon. Alexander, it is said, carried the species from India to his own country, from where it reached Rome and then England.

HABITAT

The peacock is a cosmopolitan bird. Since it adapts readily to domestication, it has attained a fair distribution over the globe. Though found in diverse regions, it's greatest density and variety has been reported from certain tropical areas. Primarily, it abounds in large agricultural farms, gardens, groves and forests. The Indian peafowl is essentially a denizen of the humid tropical forests of the country. It also loves wet tracts that have luxuriant undergrowth, thick beds of reeds and

grass, clusters of trees, tree-cover and open grassy space along fresh waters. Cultivated land with standing crop adjoining a forest attracts it out of the cover in the open for food. Except for the highly desiccated regions, the swamps of the delta and the sandy seashores, its natural distribution follows forest tracts, from the sea - level to an altitude of about a thousand metres or so.



A white peacock

In the sub-Himalayan forest belt, forest patches in the Indo-Gangetic plains and in the Brahmaputra valley, the peacock finds a comfortable home. It loves to stay in woods along ravines of the Shivalik Hills and tree-covered banks of the rivers that meander through flat plains. In southern and central India, it is distributed in patches and is confined mostly to the jungles covering the undulating slopes separated by broad cultivated valleys. At higher altitudes, such as of the Nilgiris, Cardamom and Palnis, the bird can be observed at a height of about 2,500 metres, where temperate climate obtains. In some of the climatically

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inhospitable areas of Rajasthan, Saurashtra, parts of Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh, the peacock was probably brought in and kept around shrines, temples and mosques. Perhaps, this location helped the peacock to acquire a religious character and symbolic significance. The religious sentiment attached to the bird assured it of enough protection and a peaceful existence.

The exact number or peafowls in the country is not known, but a pilot survey in Rajasthan and Gujarat, conducted by the National Sample Survey in 1972-73, put them at about 1.9 million in the two States. In recent years, the peacock has also been introduced to the Andaman Islands.

In Sri Lanka, the peacock is essentially an inhabitant of the dry coastal areas, but it is to be seen in all parts of the island except in the hills. In many European countries, it is reared as a fancy bird. Both in North and South America, it is kept in estates, in a semi-captive condition.

The peacock's presence can be felt and experienced in many ways; while it is tripping over dry leaves through impenetrable thickets or exchanging sharp guttural clucking, or when seen flying to roost on branches of tall trees at the close of the day. The bird's piercing shrieks 'pehaun pehaun' at dusk and dawn are an unforgettable experience.

The peacock is known by many names. The common Sanskrit name for it is *Mayura*, which means a killer. It implies that the peacock is a killer of the killer - the snake. Some of its other names in Sanskrit are *Neelakantha, Bhujangabhuk, Sikhi, Kekin, Meghananda, Sikhandin* and *Candrakin*. In Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati and Marathi, the peacock is called *Mor*, a derivative from *Mayura*; in Kannada, *Navilu*; in Telugu, *Nemali*; in Tamil and Malayalam, *Mayil*; in Sinhali, *Monara*; and in Persian, *Taus*. In French, it is called *Paon*; it is *Pavo* in Latin and Greek. Its zoological name is *Pavo Cristatus*, which in Greek means peacock with a crest.

The coloured, external body features of the peacock are suggestive and have invariably been given symbolical names. The Sanskrit term *Sikhi* or Sikhavala (possessor of the crest) suggests dignity, novelty and pride. The white patch under the eyes is an artistic touch on the face of the bird, which distinguishes it from its cousin, the Burmese Peacock. For this characteristic, the Indian peacock is called

Sitapanga (that which has white outer corners of the eyes), signifying purity of mind and soul. The blue neck and the breast, adding greatly to the bird's beauty, give it the name Neelakantha (the blue-necked). Since the peacock is a serpent eater, it is believed that the reptile's venom has turned its neck and throat blue. The peacock's most famous ornament is the elongated tail covert. This cluster of feathers also gives it the name Kalapin, alluding to diversity in unity amongst the people of this land. These long feathers bearing the peacock's 'eyes' at their distant ends give it the name Candrakin. These 'eyes' it is believed, were bestowed on the peacock by the war god, Indra. The bright colourful body-cover and wing feathers lend it the names like Chitrapicchaka, Barhina, Barhin (possessor of brilliantly coloured variegated feathers).

The Sanskrit names *Pracalakin* and *Sikhandin* (possessor of a quivering and dancing tail which is a slave of the body) are apt as we find that the peacock glides swiftly through thickets and obstacles, carrying its long and heavy train without any impediment.

From early times, the peacock has helped to satisfy man's material needs and to provide him with recreation and also inspiration. The close relationship between man and the bird can be traced back through recorded history. Its antiquity can be inferred from the customs and beliefs of the tribal people even today.

Besides its decorative and recreational qualities, the peacock has many other uses. It has tasty meat and palatable eggs, which were probably eaten by primitive people, including kings and nobles in mediaeval times. The flesh has also been used in the preparation of medicines.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in human environment and ecology as a result of which people all over the world have begun to pay greater attention to the attractive features of the animate world. The preservation of wild life - an important component of environment-has also acquired a special significance. The peacock has been extended necessary protection in India.

2. EXTERNAL FEATURES

The peacock's body is oval and large, with a small head and a slender neck. Its fore-limbs are modified into wings for flight, and the hind-limbs for bipedal movement. The tail contains many feathers: in fact, the whole body is clothed in feathers. Its neck is flexible whereas the chest is highly rigid. The skin is soft, flexible and usually thin and tender.

In size, the peacock is larger than the peahen. The male bird is further distinguishable by being more colourful and having special ornamental feathers - the long tail-coverts known as the train. The train has 100 to 150 feathers and measures about a metre long. It goes on increasing until the bird enters its fifth or sixth year. These long feathers have disintegrated barbs, which bear the eye-spots of ocelli. The barbs are metallic green, with bronze or purple reflections. The eyes look like deep blue patches surrounded by two broad rings of brilliant blue and bronze brown. Except for the central and the outer tail-coverts, all the barbs are 'eyed'. The fan-shaped crest on the crown of the metallic blue head is present in both the sexes. The crest consists of spatula-tipped wire-like feathers. A white patch under the eyes is a distinctive characteristic of this bird. The male's neck, throat and breast are blue, with a purplish shade. The back is covered with metallic light green feathers. Each such feather is bordered with black and has a blue central streak and a V-shaped brown patch. The scapulars and the outer surface of the wing have a distinct chequering of black and buff. The flight feathers and the true tail are bright and cinnamon-coloured. The lower breast, flanks and abdomen are black and dark green.

The peacock's feathers, which push out of the skin, are dark blue, horny and have a scaly covering. They are a plumage of bright colour and striking pattern. Scarcely more than a protective mantle, they serve to enhance the power of flight. The feathers vary in size and structure. The plumes of the peacock are matchless in beauty and are used for decorative and other purposes.

Because of its heavy body, the peacock finds it difficult to fly. Nonetheless, it has flying ability. The bird alternates walking with flying. It flies by flapping its wings, steering mainly with the tail. The speed of a peacock's flight varies from stage to stage and can be easily judged. It has been observed that when chased by an enemy or in the face of other danger, the bird runs fast: it can fly as long as 150 metres. It can also fly long from a high place to the ground up to 300 metres. But it should not be overlooked that because of the heavy weight of long plumes the peacock feels uncomfortable in flight. The peahen, however, which has less weight does not suffer from the disability.

The peahen is not as ornamental as the peacock. She is a plain brown bird without the long train and her underparts are drab or dirty white. But she possesses a crest similar to that of a peacock and a good deal of green on the neck, though not as glossy as in the male. The young peafowl more or less resembles the mother in its first years.

The peacock has been under domestication since man started selective breeding, but hardly any remarkable difference has appeared between the birds reared in captivity and the wild ones. Some colour variations have, however, taken place. Two established breeds, namely, the white and the pied, are well known to breeders, but the white variety has also been reported to occur in the wild state. An entirely white peacock shows hardly a particle of pigment. The eyes on the feathers are not clearly visible, but the train fanning in feathery mist shows every detail of the eye pattern in successive ripples as in watered silk.

3. NATURE AND HABITS

he peacock is an omnivorous bird. It feeds itself both on plants and animals. Seeds and fruits are its staple food and it also eats bulbs, roots grass, leaves, the nectar of flowers and sap. Availability seems to be an important factor in determining its food habits and diet. For green food, which is essential, it snips off the tender leaves, bamboo shoots and canes. Figs and Casissa (Korinda) are its special love. The peacock adds to its menu white ants, which it extracts from termite mounds by scratching them vigorously with its strong feet, so that the tiny insects are exposed from their galleries, the bird then gets absorbed for hours together probing into termited hampers to enjoy a palatable protein diet. Forest floors littered with dead leaves and covered by grass are also scratched from time to time to unearth insects and spiders, grubs, worms and land snails. In this process, it also exposes small lizards, frogs and even snakes, all of which are promptly devoured. That the peacock, like the 'Secretary Bird', a bird of prey of Ethiopia, is an enemy of snakes, large or small, is an established fact.

In cultivated tracts, gardens, orchards and nurseries, the peafowl is not a welcome guest because of its fondness for grain, fruit and sprouting buds. Cultivators and planters get worried about the immense destruction, which it causes. It adversely affects their cash crop.

The destructive role of the peacock has been mentioned by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, in these words: 'They (peacocks) are pestilent things in gardens, doing a world of mischief ...' in St. Helena, an island in the north Atlantic Ocean, the peacock was introduced sometimes in the late 18th century as a fancy bird. Soon its number increased to such an extent that it became a serious problem to save the gardens and orchards from its ravages. A war to exterminate the bird from the island was declared, since its presence was also thought to be inauspicious. The island was freed of this majestic but defenceless bird in no time.

The peacock drinks water an hour or so after sunrise or before returning to roost at dusk, after a hearty meal. The birds troop down to

the streams or rivers flowing over rocky hills and slopes among shrubs and bamboos. But those that live in the open country prefer sandy streams of canals having thick reed beds and grass. It is essentially a bird of well-watered country.

The peacock grows and lives with various seasons and moods of nature. By spring time, while in its second year, the peacock attains its long full train, indicating maturity, and by monsoon, most of the adult peacocks are ready to dance, the bird steps out of its roost with the sunrise and then displays the dazzling feathers before its small harem which usually comprises three to five peahens. Sometimes a conflict among males takes place over the possession of the harem and they freely use their sturdy legs and long sharp spurs to settle the issue. This is a natural process of sexual selection. The victorious male takes possession of the harem. This nuptial fight is followed by courtship, also performed an hour before dusk - an act of indulgence in sex before relaxation for the night.

In the courtship display, the peacock erects his ocellated train vertically, the lateral long tail-coverts extend out horizontally and even droop, touching and trailing the ground. The square and flat real tail is erected almost vertically to supplement a matching background to the erect long train. The feathers of the rump in turn are also raised, forming a golden green shield. The partially opened chestnut wings droop at the sides and, with an occasional odd shiver of the quills produced by convulsive jerk of the abdomen, it advances slowly or struts towards the peahen. The erection and quivering of the train feathers produce a soft musical rattling sound 'jham - jham', like the patter of rain on dry leaves. There is then a slow turn to exhibit the hidden parts of the body, particularly the back and rump. Sometimes the peacock's approach to the hen is made by strutting backward showing the back side of the feathers, the greyish undertail coverts, black rump, the sombre-hued view of the rear, which suddenly is replaced by the gorgeous multi-coloured feathers with a galaxy of painted eyes. Performing these acts, the peacock feels that the beloved is admiring him, although she may peck him also. He then suddenly rushes forward with intense shivers. The erection of the gorgeous tail, the strutting, the posturing, the paroxysms of shaking is the famous dance - mayura-nritya- of the peacock. These feats are sometimes ignored by the peahens as they go on feeding, but repetitions of the sexual display finally arouse the response in the female, when she squats and the mating takes place.

The peacock has definite а breeding season, followed by a resting period, an alternation that provides a natural rhythm of activity. Generally, the breeding season starts after the break of the rains. In northern and central India, the season ranges between June and September, and in southern India, in April and May. During rains, when masses of clouds gather and thunder, the peacock dances in wild joy as if to welcome the shower upon the dry and scorched earth. The peacock feels secret a



An ornamental representation of peacock in a niche in the City Palace, Udaipur, now being used as a luxury hotel.

longing to come near the beloved at this hour of joy.

The harem of this polygamous bird usually consists of four to five peahens or sometimes, even more. The cycle of reproduction involves laying and incubating of eggs and raising of the young to maturity. After mating, the peacocks and peahens segregate and move about in separate parties. The hens then find a safe place to lay eggs and incubate them to raise the chicks. The nesting site selected by the wild birds is well-concealed in thorny shrubs of Lantana accacia (Babul) or among tangled undergrowth surrounded by tall grass, not far away from water. Generally, the peahen prefers semi-marshy banks of rivers, canals and lakes. She scrapes a hollow or selects a natural depression in which dead grass, leaves or her own feathers are accumulated, which serve as a thin lining, but she hardly makes any effort to bring any nesting material for making her nest comfortable. Sometimes the nest is so well hidden by leafy and grassy barriers that it is impossible to locate it unless one watches the peahen leaving or entering it. Hardly any trace is left on the ground leading to the nest. But the birds accustomed to living near populated areas are care-free and they do not bother much to conceal their nests and eggs. The birds may lay eggs in improbable situations in open short grass completely exposed, roofs of huts, terraces of dilapidated buildings, cornices of temples and mosques, low hollows of trees and sometimes even in old deserted nests of raptores (birds of prey).

Normally, the peahen lays four to six eggs. The eggs are broad and oval, whitish, creamy or buff in colour, glossy in texture, and are finely pitted with minute pores. The size may be that of swan's eggs. The hen incubates alone for four weeks. Rearing of the young birds is a real task for the mother; the father caring the least about the progeny. The chicks learn from their mother the art of collection of food. They run about the mother to get some food, which she digs out from under the leaves or earth; they also compete among themselves for such explored food. Everything is not smooth in the wild. There are many enemies who prey upon the peahen and the chicks. The mother hen takes all precautions to save her brood from the prowling predators of the land and the air. Nature has also helped the just hatched birds to escape from the enemies as they have good-sized flight feathers. In a week's time, they are able to flutter up to low branches when it is necessary to do so. If the

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peahen accidentally faces an enemy, she rushes forward to scare away the intruder to save her chicks or, if she scents danger, she crouches low in thickets with all her chicks, sheltering them under her wings and tail, and remains still till she is sure the danger is over.

A shy bird, the peacock dislikes human intrusion into its territory. When approached, it keeps safe distance, moving faster on the ground, warily skipping through impenetrable thickets and stopping at intervals, peering inquisitively through the bushes with outstretched neck, and taking to wings only as a last resort. Once on wings, it flaps leisurely without sailing intervals and carries its heavy, long, magnificent train with the least inconvenience over and between the hurdles of boughs and trees and through screens of creepers that envelop shrubs and trees of all heights.

The peacock is an inquisitive observer with a keen eyesight. The stealthily crawling large cats on the prowl are readily detected by the peacock. On scenting danger, it immediately raises alarm by repeatedly emitting the ear-splitting shrieks 'pehaun pehaun'. It is joined by the langurs and monkeys in a chorus, breaking the silence of the forest. This signal is good enough for the hoofed and horned animals to run for their lives, rustling fast through undercover, and for the slower and shy animals to hide for safety in nature's pockets, obscuring themselves from detection by the marauders.

The peacock is on the whole, an intelligent bird. It can make out whether a person is friendly or otherwise. It runs away on seeing the enemy, but goes close to the friendly person and often signals him to feed it.

4. IN HISTORY AND LEGEND

The peacock occupies a prominent place in history, mythology, edicts, paintings, sculpture and coins. The blue peacock has often been carried from its original home, India, by traders, travellers, nobles, kings and conquerors. Some three thousand years ago, the Phoenicians took it to the Pharaohs of Egypt. King Solomon had a fascination for it and there is a reference to it in the Old Testament, which reads:

"For the king had at sea a navy of Tharshish with the navy of Hiram: once in three years came the navy of Tharshish, bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes, and peacocks. So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom." (I Kings X, 22, 23).

This and the corresponding reference in *II Chronicles IX*, 21, is confirmation of the fact that the peacock was exported from India. The Queen of Sheba, on her royal visit to the court of King Solomon, is also said to have presented a few pairs of birds of the Orient which were not only beautiful and fantastic but were romantic dancers. Those were the peacocks from India.

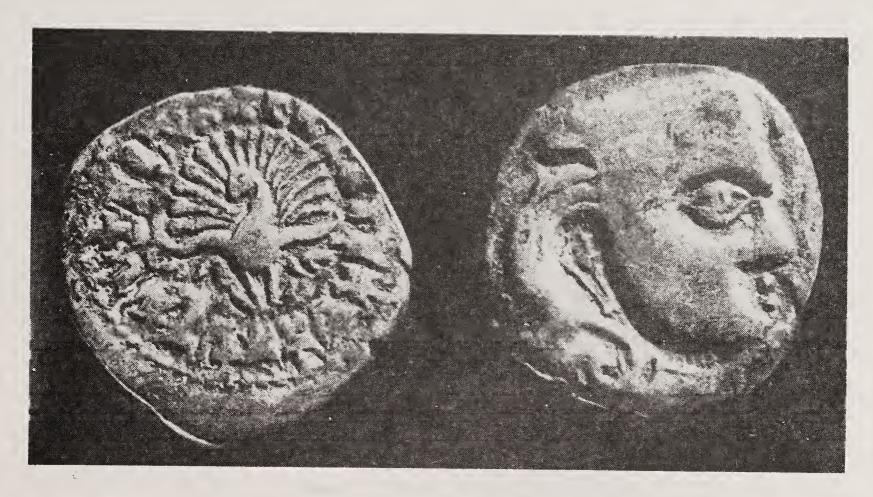
The Greek philosopher, Aristophanes, and other writers of ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt, have mentioned this magnificent bird. Details about the bird came to light when Alexander took back with him from India to Greece some 200 peacocks in about 326 B. C. From there, the species spread over the Mediterranean countries. At the time of Pericles (590-429 B. C.), the peacock was such a rare phenomenon in Europe that people came from distant lands to look at it. Elien, a famous philosopher, stated that a peacock would fetch about 1,000 Drachmes, equal to about Rs. 3,000. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, (384-322 B. C.), too mentioned its physical features and food habits.

IN MYTHOLOGY

In India, the peacock is highly esteemed and venerated because of its mythological association. The bird is identified as the vehicle (*Vahana*) of Skanda or Karttikeya, the champion fighter and

IN HISTORY AND LEGEND

commander-in-chief of the army of gods. The *Mahabharata* and the *Pauranic* texts carry descriptions of Lord Karttikeya, mounted on the peacock, who defended Tripurari's chariot and destroyed Asur Taraka. At Mayurapura, a hill in south India, Karttikeya is believed to have killed a demon who thereafter was turned into a peacock. This peacock had then to serve as the vehicle of Subrahmaniam, the god of yogic powers.



Impression of a fan-tailed peacock on the obverse of silver coins circulated of silver coins circulated by Kumara Gupta I (413-453 A. D.). Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

The *Rigveda* mentions that war god Indra's horses possessed hair like peacock's feathers and tails like those of the peacock. Valmiki's *Ramayana* contains an interesting account of Indra turning himself into a peacock to escape the wrath of Ravana, the indestructible. The story runs that when King Maruta was performing *yagna*, which was largely attended by gods, Ravana suddenly appeared on the scene to immobilise the gods and destroy them. Many of the gods transformed themselves into various forms of birds and animals. Indra chose the guise of the peacock and managed to escape the notice of Ravana. Indra then

bestowed upon the peacock-variegated feathers with thousands of eyes and the powers to destroy serpents and of bringing rain for the welfare of the people.

Lord Krishna honoured the peacock by wearing its feathers as headgear from the very days of his childhood. The great Bana of the *Mahabharata* fame, used it as his banner. The peacock was the totem of the Mauryas, a name derived from the word *mor* (peacock). After the battle of Kalinga, Emperor Asoka who had banned the killing of animals allowed, however, only two peacocks to be killed for the royal kitchen. But, eventually, even this was stopped.

According to Jain scriptures, the peacock was used by Harinaigamesin, the army chief and god of nativity, as a vehicle. The peacock is the emblem of Jaina Yaksha, Yakshini and Kumara attached to Tirthankara Vasupujya and Mahamanasi to Santinatha. Mahamayuri, the Buddhist deity, also used this bird for a similar purpose.

The peacock is also associated with lord Muruga, who in south India is treated on the same footing as Karttikeya, and also with Saraswati in arranging the first cord of her lute (*vina*). As she plays the lute, the peacock sings harmoniously with its melodious voice on the highest pitch of the seven notations, and dances rhythmically, fanning out the tail. The evening and early morning calls of the peacock ' *may-aure*' are believed to be in *sadja*, the first of the seven primary musical notes.

The peacock also figures prominently in western mythologies. According to Greek mythology, Jupiter's mischievous and ill-natured wife, Juno, pulled out hundred eyes of the demon Argus and transplanted them on the tail of her favourite bird, the peacock.

Another mythical story runs that when God created the peacock with ornamental feathers, the seven 'Deadly Sins 'protested against such special favours towards this bird. He, therefore, set the eyes of the 'Sins' on to the feathers, the yellow eye of Envy, the red eye of Murder, the green eye of Jealousy and so on, and liberated the bird. The 'Sins' pursued the peacock to get back the lost eyes but their attempts proved futile. Hence the belief that along with the feathered 'eye', the 'Sins' also creep in wherever it is placed.

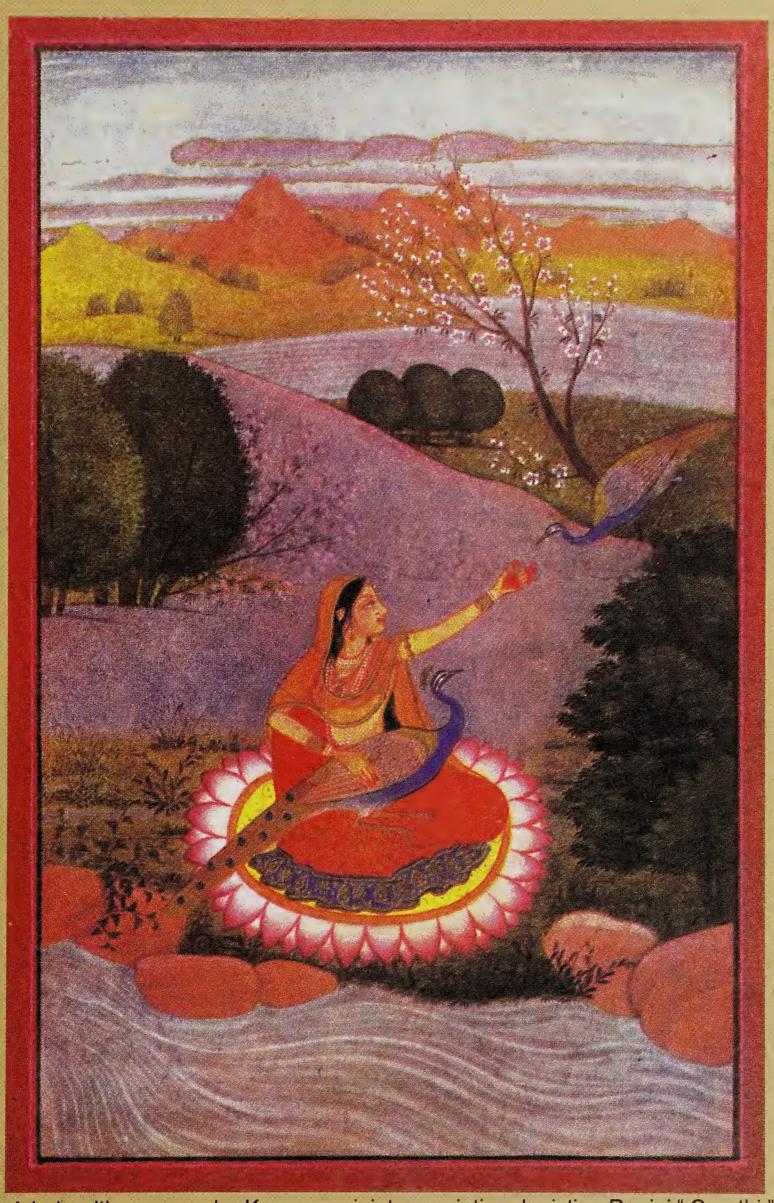


Sri Krishna lifting Govardhana mountain with peacocks on it. Garhwal School.

Artist: Mola Ram.



Peacock out in the open to feed themselves.



A lady with a peacock - Kangara miniature painting depicting Ragini " Sorathi " Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.



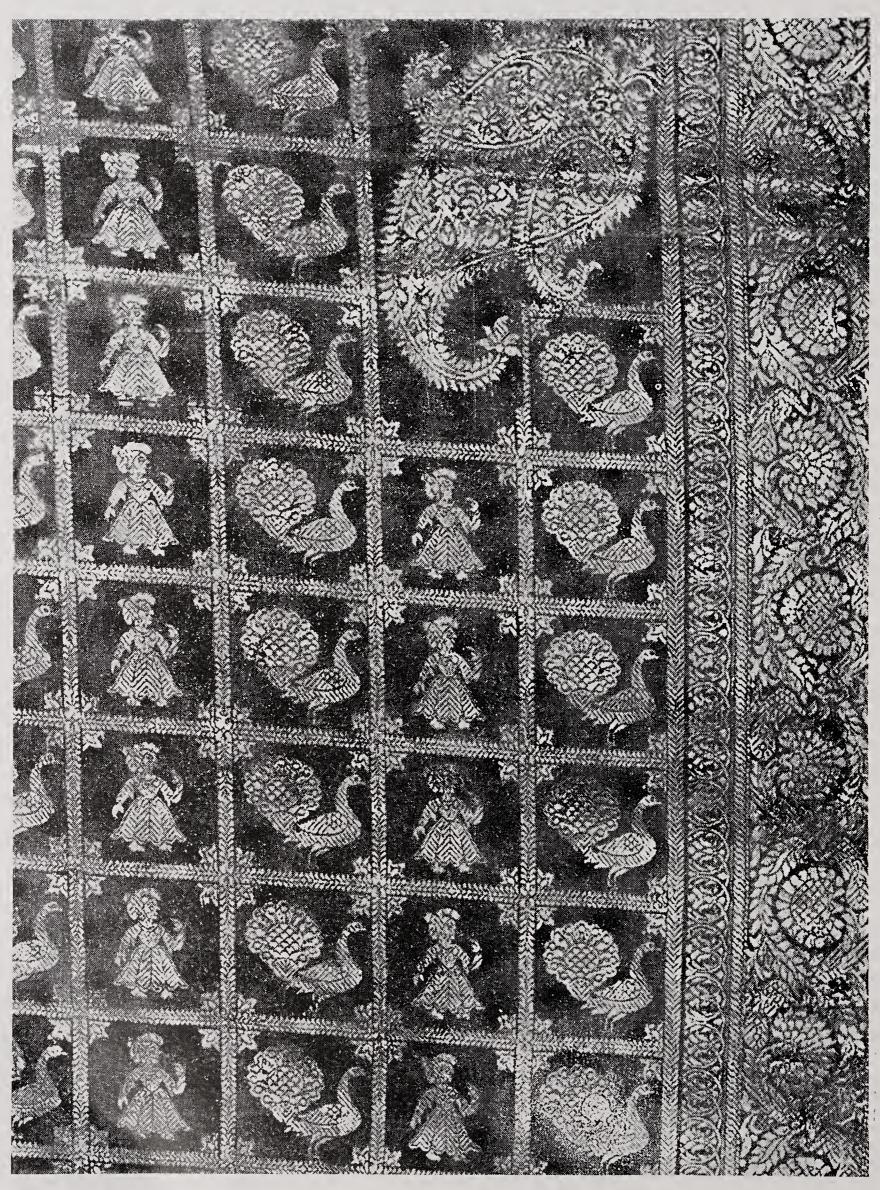




A dancing peacock



Stone sculpture showing Karttikeya with his favourite mount - the peacock. (Late Gupta Vardhana, 7th Century A. D.)



A textile exhibit with a peacock motif. Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

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BELIEFS AND SUPERSTITIONS

Beliefs and superstitions about the peacock have developed throughout the world wherever this splendid bird is found. Varahamihira, the author of *Brihatsamhita*, regarded the peacock as an auspicious bird and in one of the chapters titled 'Mayura-chitrakam', he lavished praise on it. According to him, if one comes across a peacock as one step out for the day's business, it brings good luck. Similarly, if the peacock confines his activities to daylight, which it normally does, this indicates the prevalance of peaceful conditions in the country. But if it is active in the night, this is considered a sign of bad days and disaster for the king.

In Prakrit literature, *Angavijja* also considers it as an auspicious bird.

Vatsyayan, the author of *Kamasutra*, mentions that a talisman made out of a peacock bone enclosed in gold-case and tied on one's right hand works as magic to allure and win over the opposite sex.

The *Adivasis* (tribals) of southern and central India, who still follow the ancient Dravidian customs, regard the peacock as Earth Goddess and worship it. On the occasion of Pongal, an important festival, women worship the peacock. In central India, the Mori clan have the peacock as their totem. They offer grain to the peacock on a red piece of cloth with Swastika marks around it, which is kept in the bird's track. They believe that if the peacock appears on the scene and partakes of the grain, this would indicate the fulfilment of their desired purpose. On the contrary, if a person steps on the cloth, he is apt to suffer. If a woman happens to see the sacred bird, she must veil her face to avoid its sight, otherwise ill omen would befall her.

The chiefs of the erstwhile princely state of Mayurbhanj in Orissa had the peacock as their emblem for they believed that they were born from the egg of a peacock. Among the Ahirs and Kandhs also, who have peacock totems, this bird is held sacred.

People in ancient China regarded the bird as a harbinger of peace and prosperity as well as a symbol of beauty and dignity. Its tail feathers with 'eye' tips were used to indicate official ranks in the Ming dynasty. In western countries, specially in Britain, the peacock is considered inauspicious; people do not keep peacock feathers in their homes. To the people in many countries of the Continent, the peacock's tail means the star-studded sky or the ever watchful Evil Eyes.

FOLKLORE

Many folk tales are prevalent in India about the creation of the peacock and how it acquired its resplendent plumes.

The Kuttia Konds of Rangaparu, Ganjam district, Orissa, believe that their goddess Nirantali created the peacock out of a model made from wax excreted by a fly under duress because she talked lightly about the chastity of the goddess to the elephant, tiger and some other animals. The goddess created the first bright and colourful peacock by setting some bamboo leaves in the head of the wax model, sliver of bamboo on its tail, and bamboo shavings covering its body. With some silver power made out of her silver nose-ring and scattering the same on the body of the wax-bird, she gave life to it.

According to the Binjhwar tribesmen of Raipur district, Madhya Pradesh, a carpenter named Musraha created this bird. The story goes that the carpenter, while shaping a plough, was disturbed by the cracking calls of the blue jay. Annoyed, he threw some wood shavings at it. As these fell on the bird, it developed golden and green-blue feathers and settled down by the side of the carpenter, who was taken aback at the change in the bird and named it *Mor* (mine).

The Saoras, tribals of Potla in Koraput district of Orissa, believe that the fine tufts on the head and the luxuriant, long tail-feathers which the peacock has, are the outcome of a quarrel between their supreme god Kittung and his wife. The story runs that Kittung was deserted by his wife who went to stay with some other person. While in search of his wife, Kittung met a pair of peacocks and asked them whether they had seen his wife. As they failed to furnish any clue, Kittung became angry. He pulled out some of his hair and put them on their heads and stuck some sticks of shrubs in their backs. The peacocks were extremely shocked at this treatment. When the birds were in tears, Kittung's wife also appeared on the scene. When apprised of the incident, she became quite sympathetic to the birds and changed the hair and the shrubs fixed on to the peacocks into fine tufts on the head and long rainbow-coloured tail. She blessed that the birds will receive adoration of all.

IN HISTORY AND LEGEND 17



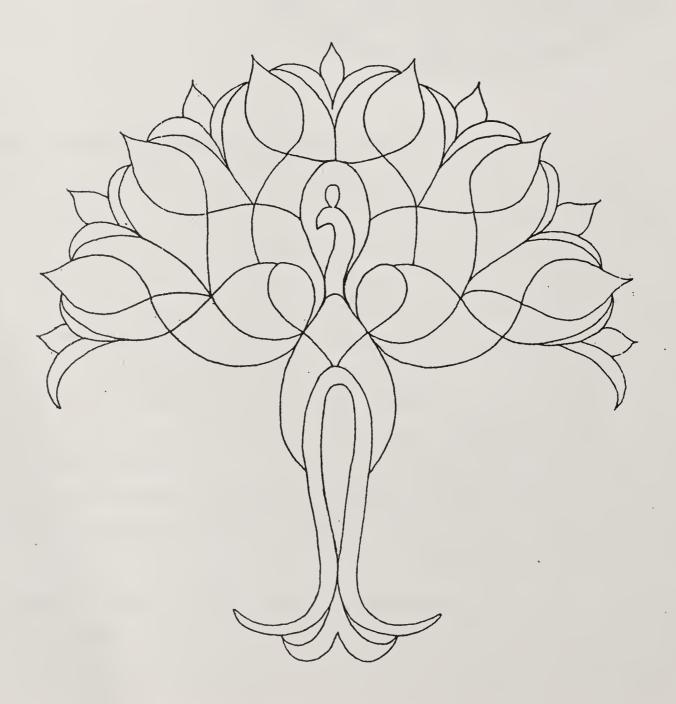
Peacock with spread tail as carved on the railings of Bharhut stupa (about 1st century B. C.)

The long tail - feathers with hundred eye-designs have been account - ed for by the Khasis of Meghalaya in their mythology. According to them, when the world was created, Ka Sngi (the sun), supposed to be a beautiful maiden who kept the world lighted, was feeling lonely and longed for company. U Klew, the peacock, who was then a drab looking bird, was sent by the community of birds as its representative to give her company. Ka Sngi at the very first sight of U Klew fell in love with him, but the latter did not respond to her and finally deserted her. Ka Sngi followed U Klew from place to place, and during that period the earth was plunged into total darkness and rains accompanied by thunderstorms lashed the earth. Ka Sngi's tears dropped on U Klew's tail-feathers which were transformed into brilliant rainbow-coloured spots which are known as *Ummat Ka Sngi* (sun's tears). These are the permanent markings of love and devotion of Ka Sngi.

According to a Kangra folk legend, the peacock's legs were originally like that of a myna, which it did not like. So, on repeated prayers to God, they were changed into tough long legs, but the peacock was not

at all happy at this and it wept. Since then, it is said that whenever the peacock dances before the peahen he feels ashamed of showing his unfeathered legs and sheds tears. Its mate catches these precious tear drops which help in generating eggs.

The Kotas of the Nilgiri hills and the Gonds of Madhya Pradesh believe that as a pair of peacocks once prevented an ecstasized couple from having intercourse, a curse befell them which banned their mating. Since then, the peacock reproduces itself by letting its seed fall from its mouth in the course of his dance.



5. IN ART AND LITERATURE

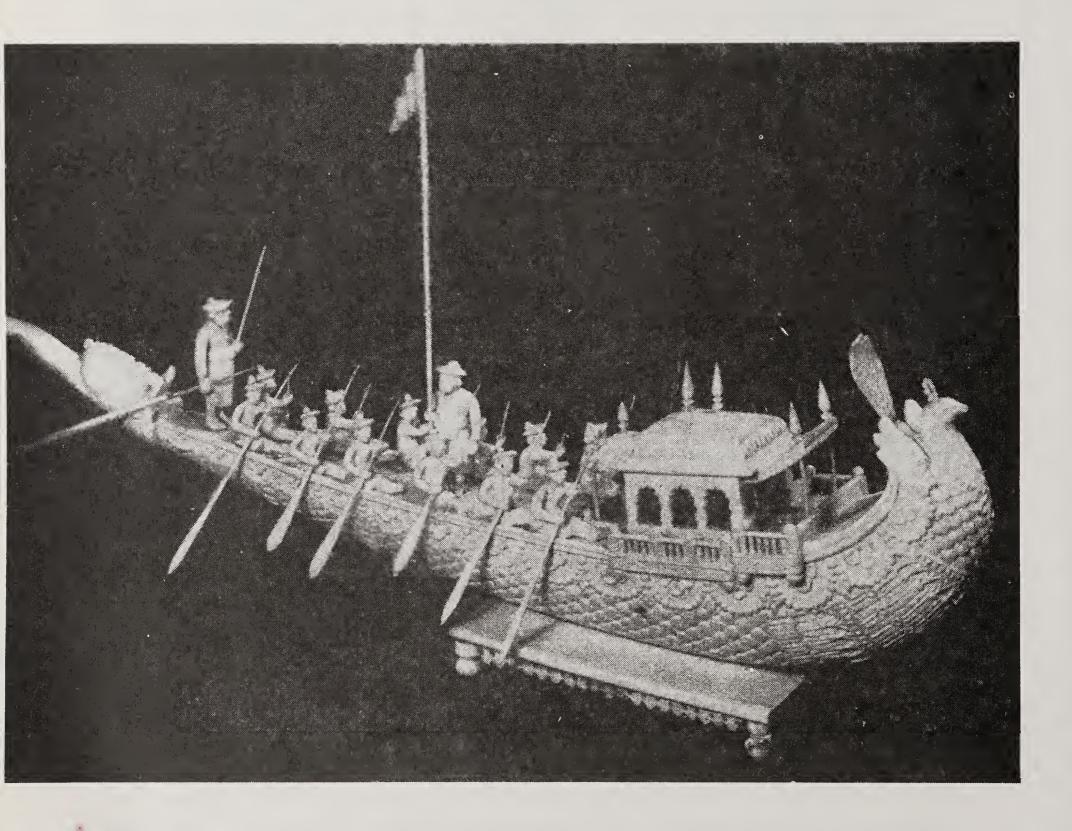
Ancient Sanskrit literature and other literatures of the Middle Ages contain copious references to the peacock and its intimate relationship with human society. It has been associated with human bliss and happiness as well as with grief and sorrow. It is said to have acted as a messenger of love and also kept company with the lover and the beloved. The *Rigveda*, in a fine specimen of poetic composition, mentions the peacock as Indra's favourite bird. The peacock figures in the other three Vedas also. The *Atharvaveda* refers to the peacock's zeal in killing and chopping snakes to pieces. The *Sukla - Yajurveda* includes the peacock in the sacrament offered to the twin-gods Asvins at the *Asvamedha - Yagna*. The Brahamanical texts like *Aitareya*, *Aranyakas* and *Sankhya* describe the peacock as a glorious bird of the heaven.

There are several references to the peacock in the *Ramayana*, which are highly suggestive. While in exile for 14 years in the forests, Rama and Sita always liked the company of peacocks and watched their graceful dances, but when Rama missed Sita, he was too much aggrieved to look at these birds. When Sita was abandoned by Rama after his coronation, all the trees, the flowers and the deer wept at her fate and the peacock ceased to dance. The Spirit of Ayodhya informed Kusha, son of Rama and Sita, that in the capital the peacock had stopped dancing and had gone back to the wilds. Exactly this incident was repeated when Lord Krishna left Vrindavan for Mathura.

While describing the beauty of nature, Kalidasa, the great Indian poet and dramatist (450-484 A. D.) has made special mention of the peacocks on several occasions. He speaks of its variegated feathers, gait, temperament and behaviour. In his dramatic compositions, he narrates the peacock's reactions to the changing season; how the oppressive summer heat inactivates the bird and how the rains provide fresh energy to it to dance with its outstretched feathers, displaying the ornamentations, specially the ocelli (eyes) which allure the bees that mistake them for blue lotus. In *Raghuvamsa*, he describes how the peacocks share the rejoicing on Raghu's birth, when water sports were

held and women sang to the accompaniment of *mridanga*. Moved by the enchanting melody, the peacocks expressed their happiness by fanning their tail feathers.

In Kumarasambhava, Kalidasa describes the graceful dance by peacocks on the occasion of the marriage of Siva and Parvati. There is



Replica of a Mayurpankhi (peacock-shaped vessel) in ivory, from Murshidabad, West Bengal. Courtesy: Indian Museum, Calcutta.

another reference - when Karttikeya, mounted on the peacock, led the devas (gods) against and asuras (demons), the column of dust raised by the marching armies appeared like rain-clouds to the peacocks and they danced in sheer excitement. In Meghaduta and Ritusamhara, Kalidasa talks of the peacock as the supreme symbol of the joy of life. In another situation, Kamadeva leaves the peacocks to go to the swans; the peacocks he leaves are those that have given up their practice of dance. In Meghaduta, beautiful young women of Ujjaini, the graceful ladies of Alakapuri and also the peacocks dance as soon as the cloud-messenger to the northern mountains appears in the sky, thundering and bringing rain. Yaksha's beloved makes the peacock dance while she beats time. In Alakapuri are seen tamed peacocks stretching their necks towards the sky and calling the separated beloved to reunion. The poet has furnished a description of the blue-necked peacock perched on a golden stand studded with precious coloured stones and gems in Yaksha's palace and its graceful dance before his wife. In Abhignana Shakuntalam, too, he makes mention of domesticated peacocks perching on the roofs of houses. At another place, in order to divert the attention of young Bharat from the lion-cub, a toy-peacock of clay is suggested as an alternative. The cub was being fondled by Shakuntala's child in his playful mood, which the lioness and the cub did not like.

In Banabhatta's (606 to 648 A. D.) *Kadambari*, which is a child source of music and dance, the *apsaras*, kings, queens, ministers, damsels and courtesans, as also creepers, birds, and the peacock, all dance at one stage or another.

In his masterpiece, *Uttararamacharita*, Bhavabhuti (730 A. D.), while referring to peacock, has beautifully portrayed Rama's feeling towards his beloved wife, Sita, who had been kidnapped by Ravana. Looking at the wild peacock, Rama is reminded of the days when they together watched the peacock dance. The fan-tail dance of the bird from time to time brings back to his memory Sita's rhythmic clappings of her leaf-like palms and her circling eyeballs, which brought heavenly bliss and life to Panchavati.

Bharavi, the author of *Kiratarjuniya*, who was renowned for his ornate poetic style, describes how the peacocks were delighted at the sound of music produced by the churning of milk pot which is like the

thunders emitted by the rain-clouds. In another stanza, the poet describes how the sight of the roosting peacock, with the melancholy of the sunset, engrosses the deer. They watch the peacock at that hour so attentively that they forget to eat the green foliage and fruits and cannot hear the songs of the cow-herdesses.

In *Mrigapakshi Sastram* (the science of the living world, beasts and birds, Hamsadeva, the great naturalist of the 13th century, has furnished a detailed description of the peacock, based on his observations. He placed this bird in six categories, namely *Mayura*, *Barhin*, *Neelakanthan*, *Bhujangabhuk*, *Sikhavala* and *Kekin* according to the colour schemes, plumage, habits and habitat of the bird.

IN INDIAN SCULPTURE

In the proto - historic, ancient and the mediaeval periods of India, there is evidence of the peacock being adored by the people. The earliest Indian civilization of the Harrapan age, (2500-1500 B. C.) produced a great number of animal forms in terracota, pottery and seals. Of these, the form of the beautiful peacock is a recurring motif in the large jars recovered from Harrapa. On one of the jars, the outline of the peacock is filled in with diagonal lines. On the painted pots recovered from Cemetary H, the peacock is painted in black colour on a red background, with a flowing crest, slightly spread-out tail-feathers and body with bands. The whole scheme is shown in horizontal bands circling the jars. It is curious that in some of these peacock designs of the burial jars, we find human figures in circles just on the torso of the bird shown with slightly raised wings.

On the railings of Bharhut stupa (about 1st century B. C.), exhibited at the Indian Museum, Calcutta there are carvings of a number of peacocks which show the peacocks in a welcome pose. The fabulous Sanchi stupas of the 1st century B. C., have groups of twin peacock decorating the architraves and posts of the stone entrance gateways; each figure shows in detail the circular eyes on the erected fan-tail feathers. On a medallion from Stupa II, these birds have been beautifully carved, showing, among other things, details of feather eyes and arrangement of barbs of feathers.

Peacock and deer in the wild state in a sanctuary are prominently carved on a pilaster of Gwalior, which belongs to the Sunga period of the

2nd century B. C., now in the custody of the National Museum, New Delhi.

At the recently discovered Chalcolithic site of 'Pandu Rajar Dhibi' in the district of Burdwan (West Bengal), a beautiful potsherd has been found with a flying peacock in incised outline, holding a snake in its beak. This dates back approximately to the middle of the 2nd century B. C.

In the 3rd century B. C., Emperor Asoka granted protection to peacock for which abhayaranyas (wild life sanctuaries) were created. In the edicts, inscribed in bold letters, he completely prohibited its killing.

A Kushana sculpture of Sridevi (Lakshmi) from Mathura (2nd century A. D.) has figures of a pair of peacocks and a lake with lotus in it in the background, carved on the back of the goddess of fortune, wealth and prosperity.

One beautiful depiction of peacock comes from Chandraketugarh, 24 - Parganas district, West Bengal, excavated by the University of Calcutta and now kept in the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Calcutta. It probably belongs either to late Sunga of Kushana periods (1st century B. C. - 1st century A. D.) and shows a beautiful peacock in the form of terracotta toy-cart which may have some ritualistic significance.

The peacock is closely associated with the classical Indian iconography of deities like Karttikeya, Subrahmaniam and some other celestial beings, which have already been mentioned. In the famous 5th century temple of Deoghar there is a remarkable depiction of a flying peacock with Karttikeya on its back on the upper portion of *Vishnuanantasayi*. Some of the Gupta stone sculptures from Madhyadesha also depict Karttikeya riding the peacock. A 7th century sculpture of Karttikeya mounted on a peacock is in the possession of Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi. Skanda with his peacock in the Somesvara temple, Mukhalingam, is another fine sculpture of the 9th - 10th century A. D. Some of the bronze sculputres, belonging to the period of the Cholas of the 10th century A. D., depict the peacock as the vehicle of Skanda. They also show the bird holding a snake in its beak, about to devour it.

The temple architecture of south India, as found in Hoysala art in bronze and stone sculpture, has quite a large number of peacocks both as mounts of deities and as independent decoration pieces.

In the Orissan School of the 11th century A. D., a sculpture Karttikeya shows a long-tailed peacock near his feet as his mount; along with it the god is holding a peacock in the left hand as his emblem. This art piece is also exhibited in the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

The Vijayanagar art of the 14th - 15th century A. D., has a fine example of a sculpture of a peacock with its outspread tail serving



A peacock-shaped container for holding cosmetics. Courtesy: Indian Museum, Calcutta.

as the Vahana of Karttikeya, but the most beautiful Karttikeya image in black basalt belongs to the Pala period (10th - 11th century). This image is now kept in the Indian Museum, Calcutta. Pieces like these invariably depict the bird with spread-out tail feathers, which cover in beautiful relief the black slab of the stone image.

The peacock motif also influenced the form of mythical creatures in Indian art. The figurines of the legendary *Kinnaras*, the musicians, with their half-human and half-bird features, recall the foliated pattern of the peacock's legs and tail. From these sculptures, it is evident that in ancient and mediaeval India the peacock was highly esteemed as the bird of paradise.

MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN ART

The Mughals also appreciated the peacock as a special fancy bird and tamed it in their court gardens. Emperor Shahjahan was so much enamoured of the bird that he got made a beautiful throne known as *Takht-e-Taus* (Peacock Throne) which had a pair of peacocks studded with emeralds and other precious stones and inlaid with gold and silver. This was a wonderful piece of art, which was kept at the court in Delhi. Nadir Shah, the Emperor of Persia, who ransacked the capital of the Mughals in 1739, carried away this precious booty to his country.

The peacock was also an emblem of the Romans. The Christians consider it as an attribute of Christ and Saint Barbara. As such, the bird has carved for itself a place in Christian art, specially in various churches of the world. The Cathedral of St. Mark in Venice has a beautiful and graceful carving of a peacock.

The peacock is also deeply rooted in the Zoroastrian cult from time immemorial. The Zoroastrians have the *Malak-e- Taus* (angel-peacock) as their religious symbol. A bronze figure of the *Malak-e-Taus* is taken out in public by the head of the village or town, and water kept in the body chamber of this mock bird is received by the people as sacrament. This has, perhaps, originated from Babylonian or Assyrian art.

Among the Tachtadji in Lykia the same practice prevails, but the bronze embodiment is replaced by the actual peacock and it is regarded as an incarnation of the evil.

The Arabs believe that *Malak-e-Taus* symbolised the sun god supported by universal axis. According to Muslims of Java, the peacock is the guardian at the gate of paradise and devours the devils who try to obstruct the entry of the devout into heaven.

FOLK ART

A large portion of the traditional art of India is connected with the peacock motif. Peacocks with spread-out wings or long tails, sometimes holding snakes in their beaks, is a recurrent theme found on triangular terracotta plaques from the mediaeval temples of Bengal erected between the 17th and 19th centuries. During the same period and from the same area come the beautiful wooden reliefs by the *Sutradhara*

artists of Bengal. It is, therefore, not surprising that decorated posts, beams and door panels show peacocks in carvings. In the mediaeval palaces of Rajasthan and elsewhere also we find that a majority of the doors are decorated by colourful representation of the peacocks. In one of the well-known legends of Bengal, the maritime peacock-shaped vessel (*Mayurpankhi*) of Chand Saudagar, a merchant, sailed across the blue south seas for trade; miniature replicas of it have been carved in ivory in Murshidabad.

In the world of Indian clay-dolls, the presence of peacocks is notable. Sometimes these dolls show peacocks with wings spread out. In other cases we find small clay pellets affixed to a group of small sticks. The painted wooden toys of Rajasthan, including those from Jaipur area, show beautiful multi-coloured peacocks. The *Sringardan* or cosmetic boxes from Udaipur and other areas of Rajasthan also depict a stylised peacock whose wings are movable so that articles could be kept inside the body prepared in the form of a box. A beautiful peacock pattern lime-box from Rajasthan is exhibited in the Indian Museum, Calcutta. Popular multi-coloured wooden toys of Andhra show the peacock time and again.

In Bengal and Assam, peacocks made with *Shola-pith* are extremely attractive, and on the occasion of marriage, the bridegroom's conical decorative hat (*Topor*) bears the bird at the top. It signifies the auspicious moments of human life. The famous Bengal ritual vases (*Eo-sara*) connected with the marriage ceremony are supplied with a peacock lid with an extremely artistic representation of the bird. The same is true of ritualistic vases from Mithila in north Bihar. Folk paintings of a wide variety, particularly Bengal painted scrolls (*Jarano Pat*) associated with Lord Krishna's life and allied subjects depict many peacock figures. Printed cotton sheets (*jajim*) of the 18th and 19th centuries, having floral designs and figures of peacocks and other birds, are exquisite pieces of decorative art.

Indian textiles have made frequent use of peacock figures. In the famous hand-embroidered quilts (Kanthas) of Bengal and Saurashtra, beautiful peacock motifs figure invariably along with those of other animal and human figures. It symbolises the wish for affluence of the recipient of the Kantha quilt. In the 18th and 19th centuries, chain-stitched ladies garments from Kathiawar and



An elaborate metallic lamp-stand with stylised peacock at the top. Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

Saurashtra often had peacock designs. Peacock figures are also depicted in all major and minor art works of India like ivory and precious stones, jewellery, enamelling and nickel decoration and bronze art.

DANCE AND MUSIC

The science of music has two metres named after the peacock. In the *Natyasastra* there is mention of a metre known as *Mattamayura*. In his celebrated treatise *Nrittarat* - *nakara*, Kedarbhatta has given expression to the ten-lettered metre *Mayurasarani*.

The colourful feather display of the peacock, its different manoeuvres, poses and postures and the flamboyant courtship antics have greatly influenced the art and life of man. This has found expression in the rhythm of life - the dance. Classical treatises like *Natyasastra* of

Bharatmuni and Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikeshwara form the genesis of classical dances in ancient India. The dances derived therefrom are Bharata Natyam of Tamil Nadu, Kathakli of Kerala and Kuchipudi of Andhra Pradesh.

The Kathak of northern India in which the peacock dance is a lively item was evolved at a latter stage. All these styles are to some extent adaptations of different postures and dancing movements of the peacock. In these dances, hands become the vehicles of 'dance speech' like the figures of speech in grammar. We find 31 single and 27 combined hand gestures, which constitute the complete, grammatically perfect language of signs of hands of hastas. In the treatises on classical dance, the peacock is expressed by the hand raised with palm facing outwards. The peacock's beak is signified by extending four fingers straight, the third finger is bent to touch it at the tip. Many other gestures indicate the whole figure of the peacock.

In Bharata Natyam, the peacock is indicated by the combination of *Kapitha* and *Sola Padma*. The exposition is rendered by placing the palm of the right hand on to the back of the left, like the fan-tail of the bird.

In Kathak, the big tail of this bird is indicated by the hand-sign *Samdamsa*; palms facing outwards, and the hands taken from one side to the other in a large circle over the head, wrist touching and fingers upwards indicating the elongated spread out tail.

In Kathakali, the expression of the peacock is by the hand gestures *Hamsasya*. Both the hands are held a little forward at chest level and the third and little fingers of the right hand are placed over the third and little fingers of the left hand. The first and second fingers of each hand are placed against one another face to face and the thumbs touch along their entire length. In this position, the first and second fingers have their tips pointed outwards and the hands together form the shape of the beak of the peacock.

In Odissi, the peacock is expressed by the combination of hand gestures, namely, *Kapitha* and *Ala Padma*. The left hand in the first gesture is held forward, palm facing outwards. The right hand in the second gesture is placed behind it on the wrist. The palm of the right hand faces the back of the left hand like a spread-out fan-tail of the peacock.

The tribal people of India, who loved to stay in the jungles in the company of the peacock and other wild life, have carried over from

generation to generation a rich heritage of dance, song and music, inspired by nature and mythological beliefs, consistent with the land, the people, and the living world of theirs . They believe that the peacock is nature's vanity and grace, and one who decorates oneself with the peacock's plumes looks not only beautiful but also adds to the prosperity of the commune. The Baigas of Madhya Pradesh, who are considered to be one of the ancient people of India, perform the Kar a dance in which gaily dressed men wear large turbans set with peacock feathers and women adorn their hair with peacock feathers. While performing the Chherta dance, the chief dancers of the Murias of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh, wear masks and peacock feathers in their headdress. In the Bison dance, which is generally performed during a marriage celebration, men wear colourful headdresses consisting of a pair of bison horns crowned with a tuft of peacock feathers. The Karma dance is also performed by the Bimjhal, Kharia, Oraon, Kisan and Kol tribals of Orissa on the 11th day of the full-moon in Bhadra (August - September) to appease their tribal deity, Karmarani, the giver of good fortune and a happy family. The Warlis, a forest tribe of Maharashtra, put peacock feathers in a brass pot-the feathers representing Hirva, their household godling, and dance around it. The Chaus of the Seraikel area of Bihar perform the nuptial dance Phual Baant or dance of love during spring in the manner of a peacock, with gorgeous and dazzling dress in peacock shades. In the harvest dance, Khamba Lim of the Zemi tribe of the Nagas of Cachar and Manipur, men with their head-wear decorated with long peacock tail feathers and women with colourful scarves, dance together. They fall in two lines and dance as peacocks do while courting. In Bhutan, folk dancers perform community peacock dance and sing songs in praise of the bird. In Nepal also, dances are performed during the local festivities in honour of Sri Krishna, and the peacocks are associated with Gopikas.

PAINTINGS

In the exquisite paintings of mediaeval India, we find innumerable peacock motifs, some of which are very attractive. This is partly on account of the fact that the popularity of the Krishna cult made the symbol of peacock meaningful in depicting the heavenly love-dalliance of Radha and Krishna. Indian musical modes are represented pictorially by *ragas* and *raginis*, which are essential parts of the melody and are

symbolised by the peacock. In *Malhara Raga*, peacocks form an important accessory, representing thirst for love. *Raga Vasanta* is not complete without the plumage of the peacock, in which the principal hero is Lord Krishna. The *Madhu - madhavi Ragini* is the silent agony of the beloved to get united with her lover, the peacock symbolising the absent lover. These *ragas* and *ragini* are well reflected in series of Rajasthani and Pahari paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries.

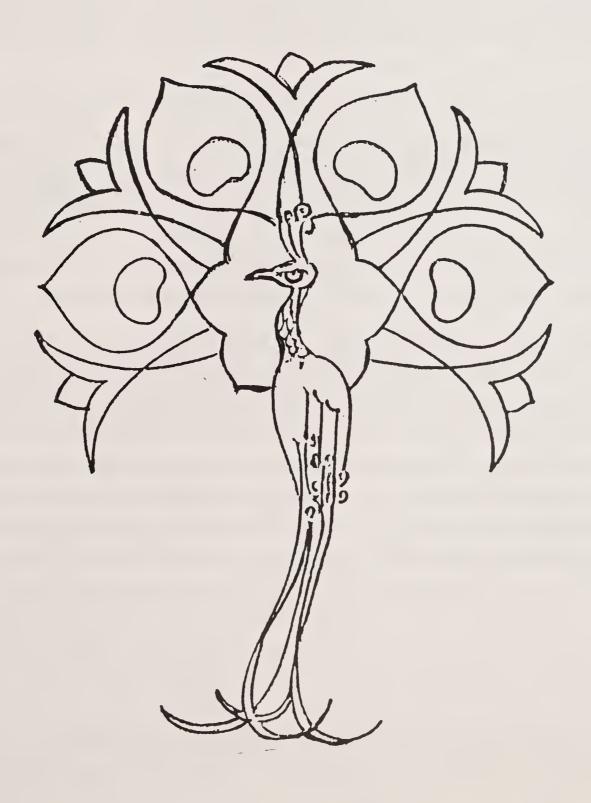
IN NUMISMATICS

Numismatists have found punch-marked and diced coins of India bearing the image of the peacock from about the 5th and 4th centuries B. C. On the punch-marked silver coins which date from the 4th and 2nd centuries B. C., stamps of punches were struck at different times by different hands and by different dice authorised by the state. Out of five punches on silver coins, three were of animals and plants. Occasionally, a peacock on a mountain on the obverse, or sometimes on both faces, was marked.

In one class of Yaudheya coins (2nd to 4th centuries A. D.), it is found that Skanda and the peacock co-existed but Skanda did not use the peacock as a vehicle anywhere. During the Gupta period (5th and 6th centuries A. D.), impression of the peacock on gold and silver coins appeared to be quite common. When Kumaragupta I (413-53 A. D.) ascended the throne, he circulated the coins extensively, specially after performing the *Asvamedha Yagna* (horse sacrifice). Subsequently, he assumed the title of Mahendra. He issued a type of gold coin, which, on one face, depicted him feeding a peacock with grapes, and, on the reverse, Karttikeya riding the peacock. In another coin, there is an impression of goddess Lakshmi, seated and offering fruits to the peacock.

In the silver series of coins (western Kshatrapa type), a fantailed peacock occupies the entire central field. The tiger-slayer type coin shows goddess Lakshmi standing on a lotus flower, holding the long stalk of another flower and feeding the peacock with fruits. The silver coins of Skandagupta (455-480 A. D.) found in western India were more or less based on the pattern of Kumaragupta I. Some of his coins are in the western Kshatrapa type which bear the peacock's impression with outstretched fantail. Budhagupta's coins (480-500 A. D.) have on the reverse side impression of the peacock standing with its head facing left

and wings and tail outspread. Some coins of the 5th century A. D. circulated by Toramana, the Hun leader, who succeeded in establishing himself as a ruler of Malwa in central India (490 A. D.), bear the image of the peacock with outstretched wings and tail. In the 7th century A. D., Maukhari Isanavarman and Siladitya-Harshavardhana of Thaneswar also circulated coins having the peacock impressed on them.



6. ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE

The peacock is not just an object of beauty. It is economically important and has manifold uses - as food, as medicine, and for decorative and ceremonial purposes.

The flesh of the peacock was considered a delicacy and a regal dish. There was a regular practice of eating its meat all over the world, specially among the kings, nobles and the tribal people in the ancient and mediaeval periods. Our epics and *Puranas* bear eloquent testimony to it.

The Ramayana mentions serving of peacock's meat in the banquet hall of Ravana. Bharadvaja served peafowls in honour of Bharata. Manu and Yajnavalkya did not object to the eating of peacock's meat, and there is no prohibition against eating the bird in Hindu and Buddhist religious texts, namely, Apasthamba, Gautama, Vasistha, and Bodhayana Dharmasutras. Bodhaghosa has stated that in Magadha the peacock was always an important item in festivals and celebrations.

The bird was reared by the Greeks from the time of Varro (116-26 B. C.) and was bred by the Romans not only for decorating their court gardens but also for use as a dish at banquets. Pliny states that Hortensius, the great Roman orator, who shook the world by his forceful speeches, was the first Roman to serve the peacock meat at a feast given to the College of Augurus, a band of intellectuals of Europe. The great Charlemagne, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, is stated to have served thousands of peacocks at a single state banquet. Aufidius Hurcon was the first Roman breeder of the peacock and his monthly income was about 60,000 Sesterces (Rs 20,000). When the Romans invaded and occupied England, they brought peacocks with them. They were served at the royal feasts in England and Scotland till the 16th century.

In the Middle Ages, it was a common practice to take a vow over a roasted peacock before initiating an adventurous action. The sacramental oath was; "I vow by God, to the Virgin Saint, to the Ladies and the Peacock". Then the toast used to be served to the guests.

ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE 33

Two special medicines known as *Mayurghrita* and *Mahamayuraghrita*, prepared chiefly from peacock's flesh, in clarified butter, are said to be efficacious in different diseases, specially in restoration of virility. The peacock meat, when cooked with other animals' flesh, either in *Dasamulirasa* or *Kaulattharasa*, cures hiccups as well as asthma. Even today peacock feathers are sold in southern and northern India and the burnt ash thereof, *Mayurapuchhabhasma*, is used as a remedy for vomiting. Oil obtained from the fat of the peacock, known as *Mayilenna*, is used for the cure of rheumatism, gout and arthritis. The Sinhalese pharmacopoeia also recognises *Mayilenna* ointment as a cure for these diseases, and also efficacious for sprains and dislocations.

In Sri Lanka, it is a common practice to grind the crest of the peacock to powder, which is swallowed to promote health. The 'eye' in the long train feathers is considered to be an excellent antidote to rat-bite; it is smoked wrapped in banana leaf.

In Punjab, India, people have a strong belief that the smoke of peafowl feathers works as an antidote to snake - bite. The ocellated feathers are also used for ophthalmic diseases.

The bile of the peacock is used in the preparation of *Mritasanjivanayoga* which has a direct effect on the blood circulation of the body and removes poison from the system. The other preparation from the bile is *Pancasirisa Agada*, which acts as an antidote to poison. In *Arthasastra*, Kautilya prescribes a mixture prepared from peacock's bile to remove the effect of poisoning administered by the enemies.

A popular belief is that the indisposed are freed from the wrath of demons and cured of diseases when peacock feathers are waved over them. Water sprinkled with the help of feathers is said to bestow blessings of Lord Buddha. Septic wounds are said to be cured by wrapping peacock feathers over the injured parts.

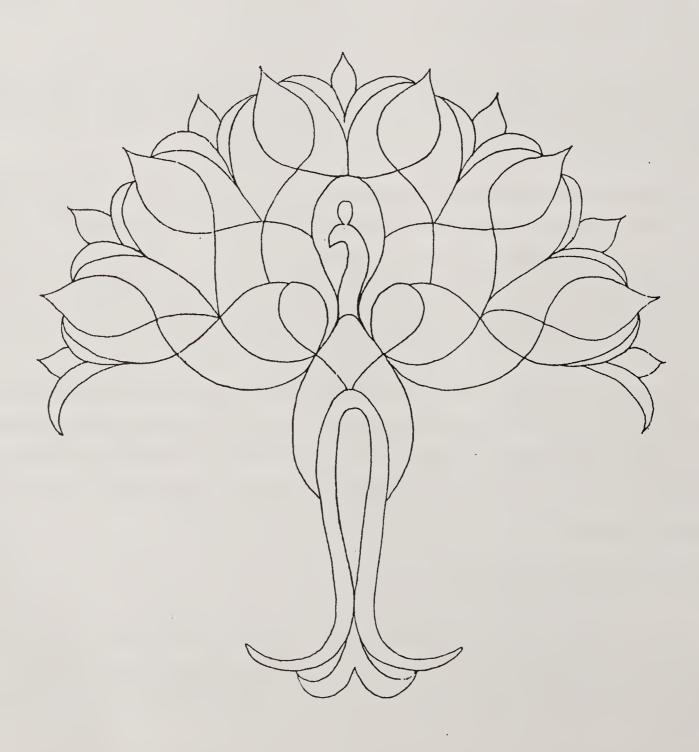
USES OF FEATHERS

Apart from their medicinal utility, peacock feathers are used in the making of various articles, such as fans, decoration pieces and brooms for use in temples, churches, mosques and homes. Fascinating fans

made from peacock feathers and encased in silver handle, Alavatham, are a common spectacle in the temples of south India.

The Aparajitaprocha of Bhuvanadeva, an important textbook on the ancient Indian architecture, refers to the royal umbrella of peacock feathers being widely used in rituals and ceremonies. Arrows with tufts of feathers tied to the rear part were believed to have the power to kill the enemy. The peacock was the symbol of immortality of the early Christians and of the supreme father. As such its feathers were always in use among religious fighters of Europe.

Men of position used feathers tucked in their turbans and caps. Not long ago, quill feathers were used as pens.





Among the birds in India - there are over 2000 of them - the most magnificent, the most fascinating and the most brilliantly coloured one is the peacock, our National Bird. This splendid bird has gorgeous plumage and it dances majestically. This book gives details of its natural habitat, nature, lifestyle along with its reference to our literature, folklore, legend, rituals and cerimonies. The book carries colourful pictures.





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